

Dr. Wexler, Class of 2002 and your families, members of the UJ community and friends:

Thank you for this honorary degree, which I will always cherish, along with the opportunity to share with all of you this very special day. Like the graduates here, I am pleased to have some special guests in attendance: my son Michael Waxman, Marjorie Resnick and my wonderful wife Janet with whom I have shared life's adventures for over thirty years.

For the graduates, this is the culmination of years of academic effort and the beginning of a new professional life made possible by the degrees that will be awarded today. Mazel Tov to all of you and your families. For your mothers and grandmothers you share this wonderful day. I know that they can't help but marvel at the short time that has elapsed from diapers to diplomas.

As Jews, we have a long history and a responsibility to remember. We do this while at the same time we live in the present. Memory and reflection give us context and understanding.

In just the past four or five years since you entered the University of Judaism, we've seen dramatic change: anti-Semitism was a remote issue; we started to think of it as arcane. The Peace Process was moving forward and we thought Israel was secure. In Washington, the budget was balanced and the heralded surplus became the watershed of an era of unprecedented prosperity in our nation. We face a different world in 2002.

But, we who have lived through events and remember history, cannot help but be shocked at the absence of memory as we confront the current situation in the Middle East.

It is as if the world has no consciousness of that fact that a Jewish State was established fifty-four years ago after the horrors of the Holocaust demonstrated that there was no alternative to the unrelenting persecution of Jews except to have our own homeland after two thousand years.

It is as if the world forgot that the 1947 U.N. partition of Palestine into a Jewish and Arab country was accepted by Israel—but became a cause for war by the Arabs to stop a Jewish state from being born.

The 1967 boundaries, now called for by the Arab League's presumed "peace plan", was unacceptable to the Arabs in 1967 because they did not want to accept and live with Israel.

And while Israel managed to absorb millions of refugees from Europe, the Middle East and Africa, the Arab countries with all their oil wealth left Palestinians in camps to live in poverty and to fester with hatred.

Do we hear any acknowledgment that Yitzchak Rabin and Ehud Barak and the overwhelming majority of the Israeli people were willing to create a Palestinian State, including part of Jerusalem; only to have Yasser Arafat respond, not by a counter-offer, but by death, violence and war.

Those who so harshly now judge Israel, seem to be unsympathetic to the Israeli victims of unrelenting terrorism. They ignore the reality that Palestinian hatred is not because of Israel's acts of self defense, but comes from an indoctrination by their teacher and parents to glorify murder and exalt suicide bombers. What Jewish mother would dispatch her children to murder other children for a \$25000 martyrdom donation, which Palestinians receive from Saudi Arabia or Saddam Hussein?

Without context and history, Arab propagandists make themselves the victims, as they call for an end to the "occupation", which if you listen carefully usually means ridding the region of Israel altogether as infidels on Arab land.

Our Jewish tradition is to remember, but also to take responsibility for the future. We are not fatalistic people, but believe in the ability of individuals and nations to make choices. And we have an overlay of values that push us to make decisions that will lead to a better and more just world.

During my years in Congress, I have seen fateful decisions by leaders,

some for good and some for ill, with real consequences.

Janet and I were in Egypt before and in Israel during the visit of Anwar Sadat. He was willing to choose to take a courageous risk for peace. As I sat in the Knesset for his speech, I could not help but realize that his actions had a transforming impact.

I compare that with my meeting with Arafat a year ago, when I suggested to him that he could accomplish all that he said he wanted if he followed the non-violent model of Ghandi or Martin Luther King. Instead, he made another choice. He told me that otherwise, in that part of the world, he would only look weak.

I am also reminded of my meeting with Basheer Asad last January in Damascus. He was an impressive and articulate man. When I urged him, as a new leader, to rise above history of the region and to choose a new path, he went on and on about the historical grievances against Israel. When I asked him if his idea of "land for peace" meant ever living with a Jewish State, he refused to accept the idea.

I am reminded of the actions of people like Natan Scharansky to stand up as one person to the powerful Soviet Union which had imprisoned him. And to Ida Nudel, who told Janet she was willing to do whatever was required of her to save her people. And of Nelson Mandella, who emerged from decades of imprisonment to forgive his prisoners in order to heal a nation.

Here in the United States, I have seen the decision by a single vote by one congressman in making historical decisions. It was by only one vote in the House, that we started the experiment of prohibiting smoking on airline flights of one hour or less; an experiment that was so successful that we now have no smoking on most airline flights and in most public places.

It was only by one vote that we were able to institute an inventory of toxic air pollutants near chemical plants, which led to landmark legislation to regulate those emissions for the first time in 1990 when we saw how much cancer and birth defect causing pollution people were exposed to.

It was also by one vote that President Clinton got his economic package through Congress in 1993, which led to one of the greatest expansions of our economy.

And when the Presidential election was so close in the State of Florida, it was only by one vote on the Supreme Court that the President of the United States was selected in 2000.

I mention all of this to impress upon the graduates, and on all of us, that we have the freedom to control our lives. Tikkun Olam and Tzedakah remind us of our obligation to repair the world and to strive for justice. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur impress upon us the power to return at that period or at any time to G-d's commandments for us.

Despite the enormity of the challenges, you can make a difference and our religion dictates that you try. You are the first post 9/11 graduating class and you face a sobered world, where many of the problems seem so overwhelming.

I want to share with you the story of an old man on the beach, who slowly picked up starfish that washed up after a big storm. He knew that the starfish would die unless put back in the water. When a boy saw him taking one at a time with so many left to do, the boy asked him what difference he could make, the old man told the boy, as he threw another starfish back, "Well, I made a difference to that one."

Frustration should never keep us from trying, and from helping some even if we could not help all. Pessimists will tell you what can't be done. But, if you focus too much on what you can't do, it will interfere with what you can do.

All of you chose to study at the University of Judaism because of pride in your Jewish identity and heritage. I urge you to continue to choose to be energized by those values so important to us as Jews and Americans in your personal, professional and communal lives .

I wish you all great success in all your endeavors. And it I may give you

one last piece of advice in tribute and acknowledgment of this special day—
don't forget to call your mother (and father) one in a while.